

texas book festival

interest in reading and books isn't dwindling

By Todd Glasscock

Three years ago, the National Endowment for the Arts put reading on life support. According to the N.E.A.'s report *Reading at Risk*, Americans had essentially unplugged the machine on novels, plays, short stories and poetry. If we accept N.E.A. Chairman Dana Gioia's comment that "America can no longer take active and engaged literacy for granted", then essays, journalism and other printed matter will follow their cousins and gasp, "O Jack Kevorkian, where art thou?"

I'm sure, however, that reading isn't awaiting its plunge into darkness visible. Not yet. Those who made the pilgrimage to last month's Texas Book Festival in Austin could see that interest in reading and books isn't dwindling. Bibliophiles mingled with the merely curious, and they investigated the Capitol's grounds together, discovering tents walled with books and tables filled with freebies. They wandered into the pink granite building's chambers to hear writers talk about reading, writing and books.

Clearly, some came for the big draws — Jenna Bush, Lynne Cheney, Kristin Gore, Kay Bailey Hutchison. These celebrities talked about their books, and those seeking

autographs got them penned inside the covers of those books; and even if the books were simply trophies, people had bought books, and were interested in writers.

And writers were interested in readers. Writers share one firm bond with readers — writers relish books, and they seem to like talking about reading, at least authors Jane Hamilton and Valerie Martin did. They spoke as part of the panel "Vintage/Anchor Books Presents: Writers on Reading".

Writers read in order to learn, to engage with characters and story, to understand, and to find pleasure, just as a reader would. They learn how to tell stories, dissecting books from the inside out. Martin said that books pique writers to write, moving them to respond to a particular book. Her novel *Trespass* is a response, in part, to Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. Both books weave the Iraq war into the narrative, but Martin felt dissatisfied with McEwan's characters; they didn't, to her mind, react strongly enough to the approaching war. So she wrote.

Reading matters to Martin enough for her to write her own books. Reading seems to matter less and less, though, in one medium, ironically — newspapers. One lively panel — "Lit Crit: The State of Book Criticism" — addressed this issue.

Moderating the panel was Jerome Weeks, former full time book critic for the *Dallas Morning News*. Until last September, when he accepted a buyout offer from the paper rather than work in a reduced arts section,

Weeks was the only full time book critic in Texas. Daily papers, he said, have slashed arts and culture sections under faulty assumptions, in particular the common excuse heard at newspapers: not enough advertising. In books and arts sections of newspapers, usually prestigious sections anyway, advertising never was high, he said.

"There's a general decline of advertising," not just in arts sections, he added.

Despite the decline in arts coverage, I don't think reading is declining; I don't think the value of books is declining. I think literary culture, like the rest of the culture, has mixed in new media to the conversation, and that mix includes book blogs. Blogs add community to what panelist Steven Kellman called a literary ecology of media outlets.

It's a lively community, one willing to go beyond the mainstream, as Jessa Crispin, founder and editor of webzine *Bookslut.com*, said during the panel discussion. Blogs and webzines cover mainstream news about books, but also cover genres rarely covered — graphic novels, for instance — and take those genres seriously.

To me, blogs have two essential features: comments and links. Comments allow interaction between writer and reader, keeping the conversation about books and writing flowing. Links take readers to other sources, whether to books on Amazon or to other blogs and webzines. Each feature continues the conversation, makes reading valuable, and assures us that others in the world are like us — literate, active, engaged, none of us gasping for breath. Still, nothing demonstrates the value of reading so clearly as actually reading a book, engaging with another mind, another imagination, with one-on-one intimacy. As critic and scholar Harold Bloom once put it, reading is "to transcend the limits of self."